

## Swing Time by Zadie Smith review - a classic story of betterment

Two childhood friends from London follow diverging paths in Smith's finest novel yet



Zadie Smith: 'What makes *Swing Time* so extraordinary are the layers on which it operates.' Photograph: Astrid Stawiarz/WireImage

*Swing Time* is Zadie Smith's fifth novel and for my money her finest. A "best friend bildungsroman" in the [Elena Ferrante](#) mould, the novel tells the story of two girls growing up on the wrong side of town. Residents of neighbouring housing estates in London, the pair meet at a community dance class, one (the unnamed narrator) clever and self-doubting, the other (Tracey) confident and self-destructive. As with the Italian bestseller, the talented friend is the tortured one – prematurely sexual, rebellious at school, ungoverned at home – while the less gifted is an able student, determined to make it out of the neighbourhood. It gives little away to say that she does, becoming an assistant to a pop star called Aimee. It is by Aimee's side that she travels the world, jetting from winters to summers.

For its plot alone, *Swing Time* makes for truly marvellous reading. The narrator's journey, from gritty estate to glittering globe and back again, is the juicy stuff of which film adaptations are made. And the music! If one were to make a playlist of the references, one would have a greatest hits of black music: from Gambian drummers to Cab Calloway to Michael Jackson to [Rakim](#). What makes *Swing Time* so extraordinary are the layers on which it operates; beneath its virtuosic plotting lies the keenest social commentary.

Cinematic as it is, the novel does what only literature can and what only great literature will: forces us to assess the very vocabulary with which we speak of human experience. Change is a central theme, for on one level *Swing Time* functions as a classic story of betterment, in which the ability to move, to change, is rendered as a form of power. The characters climb from one existential tree branch to another (presumably higher): from brown student with promise to pop star's right hand (the narrator); from provincial Aussie girl to mega-celebrity (Aimee); from activist without a degree to member of British government (the narrator's mother); from Willesden wild child to West End dancer (Tracey). On the face of things, it's the more tragic characters who end where they begin: the narrator's white father and Jamaican uncle, working-class men abandoned by their women; Tracey's mother, unattractive and overweight, last seen as we see her first: in the service of her daughter.

By the rules of the 21st-century success story, blessed are they who can reinvent themselves. *Swing Time* asks us to reconsider. Does one who succeeds in leaving home gain power or lose it? Has one

necessarily bettered oneself by moving, say, into a more impressive house or do the truly powerful feel at home just where they are?

When the narrator travels to the Gambia to help Aimee open a school for girls, she meets Hawa, the middle-class daughter of teachers. Hawa, we are told, would have been the jewel in the crown of any small village anywhere. “She had, unlike me, no contempt whatsoever for village life: she loved the smallness, the gossip, the repetition and the closeness of family... I lay on the floor next to her each night, on our neighbouring mattresses, grateful for the blue aura that came off her Samsung as she scrolled through her messages... laughing or sighing at pictures that amused her, breaking up the dark.”

Hawa, logic suggests, should want to leave her village for a “better” life. The question is: better according to whom? The narrator sees the village as pitiful; both Hawa, a privileged member of it, and Granger, Aimee’s African American bodyguard, view it differently. “Where I saw deprivation, injustice, poverty, Granger saw simplicity, a lack of materialism, communal beauty... Where I saw polygamy, misogyny, motherless children (my mother’s island childhood, only writ large, enshrined in custom), he remembered... a depressed single mother [and] spoke to me with genuine tears in his eyes of how happier he might have been raised by not one woman but 15.”



Here we come to Smith’s second major preoccupation: relativity. Nothing in this novel exists in the absolute. Race, colour, class, even happiness, exist only as relative concepts. In London the biracial narrator is brown, in the Gambia white. Tracey comes from a broken home, the narrator from a breaking one. Aimee is privileged in the narrator’s eyes (and ours), the narrator in the villagers’. Most important, triumph to one character is tragedy to another; the currency of happiness is not objective success but subjective satisfaction. By Granger’s logic – indeed, the novel’s – emotional security is to be prized over material. In this, the least likely characters carry the day.

The narrator frequently compares the Gambian village with her London estate, making note of her own estrangement in so doing. Young Gambian teachers have “an attitude I remembered from the old neighbourhood, a way of representing... I always felt absurd next to them”. Hawa is a “kind of girl who wants only one thing from this life: to have fun. I remembered the type very well from my own school days, girls like that have always mystified me – they still do.”

In both the village and the estate, the narrator feels a sense of unbelonging. But Tracey does not. Tracey is the narrator’s abiding point of reference, the one with the talent, the clarity and the fire. It is relative to Tracey, above all, that the narrator seeks to feel successful. But Tracey, like Hawa, is content with “village life”, less motivated by a desperation to leave the estate than a desire to feel empowered within it. Her success as a dancer is relative: for all her dazzling talent as a student, she never moves beyond the chorus line as a professional; still, the neighbourhood girls regard her “with a wild admiration”.

Tracey possesses gifts that appear to be wasted on the wider world: “a gift for seeing that seemed to have its only outlet and expression here, in my living room, in front of my television, and which no

teacher ever saw, and no exam ever managed to successfully register or even note, and of which, perhaps, these memories are the only true witness and record”.

But if we are tempted to view Tracey as a failure – for, she, too, ends where she begins: in precisely the same flat, watching precisely the same movies, moved by precisely the same passions – the narrator cannot. In the final frame Tracey is doing what she loves, surrounded by people she loves; a woman who has beaten her own path and followed it back to the temple of her familiar. It is the narrator, whether on a “neighbouring mattress” or in a neighbouring building, who feels herself lost, relying on the light of others for “breaking up the dark” of her alienation. With shifting identities (brown, white; goth, “conscious”; “big woman”, fallen heroine), our narrator seeks above all a place where she belongs.

That place is what a best friend, even an estranged one, can be, especially for a woman. Its comforts cannot be underestimated, not least in a life of great change. Like all of Smith’s novels, *Swing Time* has brilliant things to say about race, class, and gender, but its most poignant comment is perhaps this. Given who we are, who we are told that we are not, and who we imagine we might become, how do we find our way home? Granger’s romanticisation of village life, undoubtedly naive, rests on a correct understanding: that belonging has a value all its own.

*Taiye Selasi is the author of Ghana Must Go (Penguin). Swing Time is published by Hamish Hamilton (£18.99). [Click here to buy it for £13.99](#)*

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